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Mario De Govia

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DOG'S DAY

by Mario De Govia

Conover was not pleased with the situation. There wasn't any food involved, for one thing. For another, he was in mortal danger, which always soured his mood. Plus, he had spent the past hour crouched in a tree. Crouching in trees had never been Conover's idea of a good time, despite the fact that he was an accomplished forestman. Why people romanticized the whole idea of laying in wait with the silence of a cat and the patience of an owl in a bloody great tree he would never know. No one ever mentioned the cramps, the boredom and the increasingly important problem of relieving oneself.

Conover was, in fact, very good at lurking in trees. He just hated it. He was more interested in the crashing about variety of fighting. Still, the young woodsman thought to himself, when there are a dozen men in very effective armor clanking after you, lurking comes in handy.

Conover shifted his weight slightly and settled in for some really skillful waiting. There was time to go over what exactly had led to this situation before the first of his pursuers came into sight. It hadn't been the milk alone, he thought, but it had started with the damn rains ...

The rains were late. Usually, by this time of the year, sheets of water were falling from the sky. Instead the sun was as high and bright as the summer months. The plants were dry, the crops were in danger of failing and, this was most important, the roads were dusty.

Conover, therefore, came into the fringe town of Botheron with a dust lined throat. It wasn't the first thing he would mention if someone asked him what he disliked most in the world, but as he stepped into the tavern it was on the short list.

Being wise in the way of travel, Conover knew that the light, clear drinks wouldn't solve his dust problem. So, without hesitation, the weary young traveler had strode to the bar and requested syrup mixed into a large mug of warm milk.

"Not hot, love," he said to the woman behind the bar, "just warm enough for a baby."

The barmaid, wearing the lightest clothes she had for the unseasonable heat, leaned over to Conover. "You sure about that? A good, hot glass of milk will really get this chill out of your bones."

Conover didn't seem to recognize the sarcasm, "No thank you, warm will be fine. Goat's milk or cow's milk", he said with a distracted gesture, "makes no difference."

The barmaid shrugged and moved off, muttering to herself about the strange weather "really bringing out the loonies, I've never seen the like, to be sure."

The forestman ran a hand down his face, practically peeling layers of dirt from his sweaty skin. His fingers

brushed at his thin beard, little dust clouds puffing out of the coppery hairs and settling on the dark wood of the bar. He patted his threadbare cloak, leaving streaks of green where he knocked off the gray dirt. Conover sighed deeply, breathing the cool air of the tavern with relief, and faced the rest of the room, elbows against the bar behind him.

They were all staring at him.

For the first time, and under their unblinking gaze, Conover took notice of his companions in the small common room. All thirteen of them, he found after checking twice, were dressed exactly alike. Same red tunics, the same black gauntlets and the same brass ring-mail shirts. Each tunic had a picture of what Conover assumed was a dog sewn onto it. The dog looked as if it were mad, with fangs bared in a viscous, perpetual growl. The thirteen men who wore the tunics, however, looked merely contemptuous. It seemed a good bet to the forestman that he was the object of that contempt.

Leaning against the bar, waiting for his warm milk with honey melted into it, Conover lazily raised one hand, waggled it back and forth, and grinned at the assembled soldiers.

One of the men was instantly in the woodrunner's face. Conover was taller by a clear foot, but judging by the soldier's width, Conover was at the disadvantage.

"What kind of *woman* drinks warm milk?" the soldier sneered, a fleck of saliva hitting Conover on the cheek.

"I don't know," he replied as he wiped the spit with a finger, "what kind of woman drinks warm milk?" The soldier looked blankly at him. Conover had hoped that his answer would be taken for the joke it was. Unfortunately, judging by the rising color in the shorter man's neck, and the silent mass of his companions, he was dealing with humorless men. He began to despair for a peaceful resolution.

"Women drink milk. You some kind of woman?"

Single minded little bastard, Conover thought. "No more than wearing red makes you a lobster," he said. Puzzlement crossed his opponent's face. Oh no, the forestman thought, he's doesn't know what a lobster is. Intelligent bullies Conover could handle without violence. Idiots were more difficult.

He gave humor one more try. He tapped the symbol on the man's chest. "Or no more than wearing a dog's head makes you a dog."

Instantly, Conover sensed he had made a grievous error. The other soldiers stood up with alarming speed. "No one insults the Wolf Marchers!" they boomed in unison, clapping gauntleted hands to their identical sword hilts.

Oh Gods, Conover thought, they're Wolf-Marchers! If only they'd had a better seamstress. These quasi-religious maniacs were supposed to have disbanded years ago.

He jumped on top of the bar and took a run down the length of the short counter. Conover launched himself out the open door. He gave a short yell of pain as he thumped to the ground and came to a scraping halt in the billowing dust.

Fighting to regain his breath, Conover clawed onto his horse and spurred through the soldiers as they ran for their own mounts. He came to the edge of the small town and plunged off the dusty road into the woods. The dry grasses crunched under the horse's pounding hooves, the sound overlapped by what Conover could only assume was the Wolf Marchers howling as they gave chase...

That had been about five hours ago, Conover figured, rubbing gently at his right thigh to relieve the monstrous cramp he could feel sneaking up on his strained muscles. The last hour had been in this bloody tree.

After many fruitless attempts to lose his pursuers, Conover had finally decided to fight. Open combat, however, was right out. He had to resort to ambush. Well, he reflected, resort wasn't really the right word, with these odds ambush is preferable.

Stumbling sounds and soft curses became louder as three of the Wolf Marchers tried to sneak through the underbrush, too thick for the horses they had left behind. Conover wondered again why this group was around here. The Wolf Marchers had been strong in the area at one time, but had hit their peak over a century and a half ago. At the moment, however, he realized he should save speculation for later.

Conover placed an arrow on the string of his bow and glanced at the other ones he had stuck loosely into the trunk next to his branch. The three pursuers came into view.

Conover pulled slowly back on the string. He hoped they weren't wearing mail coifs.

He loosed the arrow, taking great pains to remain still and quiet.

On the ground, the two remaining Wolf Marchers shouted in surprise at the arrow that had sprouted from their companion's neck. Conover smiled to himself as he reached for another arrow. He turned slightly on his heels ... and screamed with the pain of all the muscles in his right leg seizing up.

Well, he thought as he plummeted to the forest floor, that will teach me to keep up with my lurking practice. He admonished himself as he struggled to stretch out the cramp and run from the soldiers simultaneously, he cursed his forgetting the more subtle aspects of ambush.

Subtlety, however, was lacking from every portion of the ensuing chase. Conover ran through thickets and brush haphazardly, yelling with pain each time he moved his right leg. The Wolf Marchers were howling and shouting as they smashed after him and, judging by the sounds, into each other. Conover could hear the howls nearer and

nearer as they gained on him...

It was, the forestman would reflect later, at about that time when things became extremely bizarre. He didn't remember entering the clearing, but all of a sudden Conover found himself in the center of a perfect ring of grass. Dead center, he realized. No breaking through the forest wall, no thinning of trees, simply there in the middle. He also couldn't remember the Wolf Marchers catching up to him, but they were with him, a red sea of menacing soldiers with the howls of the chase dying on their lips. From the marked way in which the Wolf Marchers ignored him, Conover figured they had forgotten about his insult in the confusion of their present situation.

Heedless of what might happen should their attention re-focus on him, Conover took the unexpected respite to collapse on the ground and rub frantically at his cramped leg. With a remarkable lack of speed, he managed to massage the worst of the knots from his thigh.

Scrambling back to his feet, Conover made to dash into the woods again. The sight that reached his eyes, however, stopped him cold. His erstwhile pursuers had also gone still as they gazed at the apparition before them.

The vision was, for all intents and purposes of physiognomy, a wolf. That much was clear. It had a wolf's head and fur, the paws were all there, and its tail had the same shape as a wolf's tail. Beyond that, Conover's mind gibbered at him, it was definitely *not* a wolf.

Wolves, the forestman's mind went on in a slightly quieter tone, are generally not bigger than the trees of the forest they inhabit. They most certainly don't carry scepters made from black stone. Most importantly, his mind said in a calm and even voice that did nothing to hide the underlying panic, wolves, under no circumstances, sat upon thrones. Especially not thrones made from an off white stone that looks remarkably akin to, but, and this must be absolutely clear, is not bone. Hopefully.

"Ahumm," the wolf-creature said, part growl and part satisfied sigh.

"Sacrifice," it said, with a relish that Conover found disturbing. Without much conscious thought, the young woodsman began edging away from the knot of Wolf Marchers.

The soldiers, being as they were by training and experience, drew their weapons. They muttered at each other, phrases such as "All right lads" and "Into the breach" were batted about in gruff voices. Conover took this as his cue to run in the opposite direction. Not that he was a coward, himself, he told himself, but it's obvious that these men are much more capable of handling the creature. His leg was still sore but the sounds that came from behind him distracted him from the pain.

The noises drifting over his shoulder resembled nothing more than jumping on a bag of sticks. When he had thought about it, which was not often, Conover had figured that men being devoured would be more of a wet sound rather than the dry snapping he heard. There was the occasional scream but these were cut off before they could peak.

The battle ("Or feast, depending on your point of view," Conover thought with panicked humor) did not end as suddenly as it had begun. Conover could hear whimpers and moans over the pounding of his feet and heart. His feet weren't that loud, but his heart kept beating harder as he realized the edge of the clearing was no closer to him than when he had started.

When the strangely dexterous paw grabbed the back of his neck and lifted him high in the air, Conover actually lost all sense of worry. Facing absolutely certain death had *always* had a calming effect on him. Now, as he was turned to gaze into the hungry eyes of the wolf-creature far above the forest floor, Conover found his flush fading and panic receding.

"And now this rabbit running man to chase after those bearing my image."

The muzzle cracked open. Conover could smell the recent banquet of Wolf Marchers on the beast's fetid breath. It was now, he thought to himself, that I should do something.

"Wait!" he shouted, "Wait! Wait! Wait!" Mercifully the jaws closed and the forestman found himself staring again at the canine eyes.

"What is it?" the rumbling growl asked him.

"Umm..." Conover hadn't thought this far ahead in his plan. Then it struck him, all the old tales of the Wolf Marchers had some truth to them. They *had* been religious. They must have lost sight of their god when they were in power, forgotten about the source of their power.

Now, Conover realized, he was about to be extremely intimate with that power. He improvised. "Didn't my sacrifice please you?" he asked with as much deference as he could muster.

"Your sacrifice?"

"Yes, I found them, dressed them with your image and led them to you." He wasn't sure where this line of reasoning was coming from or where it was going, but Conover stuck to it.

"No sacrifice has been given us for many ages." The growl stated. There was suspicion in the throaty words.

Conover had once met a priest who had quit his order because, the ex-cleric asserted, the Gods were more interested in flattery than helping their believers. The woodsman hoped the priest had been correct. "Well, your magnificence, sacrifice isn't as willing as it used to be. I had to scrape and hunt up an offering worthy of your great need, my lord. It took me some time, but I thought your worshipfulness would be pleased with the result of my humble efforts."

"Aye, we are pleased," the wolf-beast grumbled, casually picking up a wounded Wolf Marcher and biting him in half. The creature chewed thoughtfully as it regarded Conover dangling in front of him.

"Pleased," the growl repeated. Slowly, Conover felt himself lowered to the ground in front of the throne. He had to fight the overwhelming urge to flee that cut through

his earlier calm. With an effort he maintained his gaze on the wolf creature. A gaze that, Conover hoped, showed base humility and reverence.

"You we will not eat." The forestman nearly lost his footing at the relief that slammed into him. "You we will fight, kill, and bury near us in the sacred grove. Such honor has never been bestowed before."

Hooray, Conover thought sourly as his reprise was snatched from him. He watched the beast stand, grasp the ebony scepter in a threatening manner, and take a step towards him.

Conover spoke quickly. "Oh, your worship, I do not deserve such an honor, but far be it for me to question your wisdom. I only fear that should this tale reach the ears of your followers, they may see it as," Conover paused at the word that, when used in reference to a deity, could incur the 'divine wrath' everyone was so afraid of, "...weakness." He finished, and scrunched his eyes in anticipation of a scepter bashing down on his head.

After a moment blissfully free of blows, Conover peeked up at the wolf-creature. It was glaring at him, thoughtfully. "Weakness?" it growled, sounding more curious than angry.

Conover took the opening. "Well, your worship, it is a foregone conclusion that I shall die gloriously at your hand, but to kill me in your present form is no great feat. Perhaps more reverence would be paid if you showed how you could defeat me, insignificant wretch that I am, in the actual form of a wolf."

"Eh?" the wolf said, cocking its head to one side, "Accept your honor! Accept your death!"

"Of course, my lord. I shall do so gladly, I just hope I shall be enough sport for your worship's amusement." Conover wondered how the beast had stood for all his talking. Perhaps it had been a while since the creature had priests and followers. Conover stifled a maniac urge to laugh at the thought of a lonely god.

The wolf didn't seem to notice. "Ah, have you been raised as sacred prey?"

That sounded promising. "No, my lord. Should I fetch one who has?" Conover gestured to the clearing edge, as if there were a gaggle of the faithful eagerly waiting to get slaughtered as the Sacred Prey. Whatever that was.

"No. You shall do for now."

"Oh, thank you, my lord." Conover muttered.

"Though we doubt you shall give us much of a chase." If he had his choice, Conover would have used the word frown to describe the look on the great beast's face. "Unless... Perhaps your idea carries merit."

There was no transition between sizes, but suddenly Conover was confronted by a medium sized wolf, on all fours.

Conover smiled. The rains had finally fallen. No surface inside could be kept clean of mud and nothing outside could be kept dry.

Knocking the final chips of dried mud off his boots, Conover pulled his feet away from the common room fireplace.

He knew he'd have to brave the afternoon downpours if he wanted to make any headway. Absently he ran a finger along the edge of his new cloak. The fur was the finest he

had ever owned. But then again, the wolf he'd killed for it had been exceptional.

"Exceptionally stupid," Conover muttered to himself as he pushed the door open to step into the rain, and whatever the day held for him.

EDITORIAL

Hi everyone—here's issue #20 of *The Mythic Circle*. We have stories which range from fairy tale to modern yarn, and poems from such redoubtable authors as Joe Christopher and David Sparenberg. We also have our usual talented illustrators, along with some great new offerings by Sue Dawe. We hope you enjoy the issue.

You have probably noticed that the issue is quite late. We do apologize for this. Tina's legal practice and her triplets are growing (they are six years old now!), and as a result her daily responsibilities are overflowing the hours available in her day. Tina would also like to begin writing again, which she has not been able to do since the children were born.

Therefore, with regret, Tina has decided that she must withdraw as editor of *The Mythic Circle* after she gets this issue out. Sherwood is not able to take on additional editorial responsibilities at this time. We are searching, therefore, for some person or combination of people to take Tina's place. If no one appears, *The Mythic Circle* will suspend publication until a new editor is found.

If you are interested in becoming a new editor of *The Mythic Circle*, please write Tina or Sherwood (or any of the Council of Stewards of the Mythopoeic Society) at P.O. Box 6707, Altadena, California 91003-6707.

Tina would like to say that it has been a privilege to be editor of *The Mythic Circle*, and that she has enjoyed getting to know you. She will see you at future Mythcons. The best to all of you.

LETTERS OF COMMENT

Dear editors

Greetings. I wanted to thank you for my contributor's copy of the latest *Mythic Circle*. I was pleasantly surprised at the quality and brilliance of its contents, and I was proud to have my poem "Amber" included.

I have long been a C.S. Lewis fan and a fan of Greek mythology. It's nice to see that someone is keeping the magic alive!

Especially liked "Once Upon a Prince" by David Sander. Reminded me of the fairy tales of Andrew Lang

(Blue Fairy Book, Red Fairy Book, etc. Wonderful collections—all of them!)

Loved Sue Nevill's "Moon Marks" poem. "Women have died for skin this pale..." Very beautiful, poignant.

Thank you for your efforts in publishing *The Mythic Circle*.

Corrine De Winter
Springfield, Ma.

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